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ABSTRACT

Faced with the task of reading literature on themes perhaps foreign to their own experience, students can explore their reactions to these issues by using a case study approach, bridging the gap between the novel and the student's own experience. In a case study, the issue of racial hatred can be objectively discussed as students gather evidence (either fictional or factual) and draw conclusions based upon it, leading to a cause and effect analysis of the event described. Literature which addresses racial hatred, such as Ernest Gaines' "A Gathering of Old Men" and "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," lends itself to a case study treatment because students must use the individual narratives of the novels as primary source material for deriving a "factual" reconstruction of the novels' events. Various preliminary activities, including role plays and studies of character motivation, use reader responses to search for meaning in the novels which can then be related to the student's own experiences. After considering their affective responses, students can approach the issue by writing a formal case study, thereby permitting the expression of emotional and intellectual reactions. (Nine references are appended.) (MM)

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Fiction About Hate Groups:
A Case Study Approach

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Fiction About Hate Groups: A Case Study Approach

In October of 1987, the Ku Klux Klan staged a march in our town. As we met with other concerned people to plan a response, we became aware of how little most people in our area know about the history and activity of hate groups. Common responses to the Klan's announcement were: "Why here?" (this county is 98% white); and "If we just ignore them, they'll go away." Knowing instinctively that the latter was untrue, our group (an ad hoc committee calling itself the Celebration of Unity Coalition) staged a successful anti-Klan rally and afterwards continued to explore ways to counteract hate group activity here.

Our background as educators led us to consider ways in which young students, who may never have known a black person, could be made aware of the motivations of hate group members and of the impact such groups' activities have on the people who are their targets. As a teacher of literature and a teacher trainer, we were interested in how adolescents would respond to fiction that introduced black characters in a setting diverse from our own. We also wanted to explore fiction that presented themes related to the work of hate groups. In our reading experiences, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and A Gathering of Old Men, both by Ernest J. Gaines, stood out as works of literary quality which, while not written specifically for young adults, would still be accessible to adolescents. Both novels portray adolescent characters in crisis situations, even though adolescence is not the focus of either novel.

Most students expressed surprise at the Klan's choosing our town for recruitment (see "Brief Case Study of the Marietta Event"). Our focus in selecting these novels is the eliciting of reader responses on this subject, in the hope that students will be led to understand the historical roots of what is happening around them.

As we reread the novels and related them to our experience with the Klan, we began formulating both our record and the fictional one as case studies and developed a method of utilizing this case study approach in the high school classroom. The contemporary case study bridges the gap between the novel and the student's own experience. As we worked, we realized that many communities have their own histories of response to hate group activity, and we would like to suggest that each class develop a case study of its own community as a way of providing students with background and generating interest in the topic.

We here reproduce portions of our own case study for use as a possible model.

Brief Case Study of the Marietta Event

In September, 1987, the North Carolina-based Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan announced plans to march and hold rallies in the communities of Marietta and Belpre, Ohio. Public officials suggested that citizens stay home during the Klan's visit.

The Social Concerns Committee of a local church felt that some response was necessary and called a public meeting to determine the wishes of the community. More than 90 people attended the first meeting and formulated a statement of purpose which affirmed the unity of all members of the community, regardless of religion or ethnic background. Volunteers formed a steering committee to plan the actual event which would be a response to the Klan's visit.

Two weeks later, the group, now the Celebration of Unity Coalition, held another public meeting to report the objectives it had formulated and announce final plans for the event, a Unity Walk and rally on the Marietta College campus which would be held at the same time as the Klan rally at the courthouse. Meetings were held with college, city, and Justice Department officials to finalize plans for security. On October 24, between 500 and 600 people attended the Celebration of Unity, which concluded without major incident.

At the site of the Klan rally, other protesters shouted down Klan speakers and on two occasions had to be restrained from using violence. The next night, representatives of the North Carolina Klan group held a cross burning on a nearby farm.

As an extended research project, students may wish to develop an extended case history of race relations in their area. Our local region is well-suited to this, because this part of Ohio, a route for slaves moving North before the Civil War, also contained many Southern sympathizers because of its proximity to Virginia. Some runaway slaves settled here; others used the Underground Railroad station on their way to the industrial cities of the North.

Although community members had been active in the Abolitionist movement, by the 1920's Marietta had an active Klan chapter with Klan-Kraft, its own subscriber-supported newspaper, and an office on the town's main street.

Our complete case history includes a copy of an article from Klan-Kraft and information from Washington's Darker Brother, a privately-printed history of Washington County blacks by James Dennis.

A Note on Methodology

We chose the case study method because it encourages higher order thinking skills and the ability to organize and categorize material drawn from primary sources. As we have practiced and envisioned it, writing a case study requires the writer to gather evidence (either fictional or factual) and draw conclusions based upon it, leading to a cause and effect analysis of the event described. In addition, the case study requires that the writer develop an objective style.

The other activities we suggest utilize the readers' responses to search for meaning in the novels and through their own experiences. We see these activities as preliminary to construction of the case study, which is analytical rather than affective. Students discover through this process that literature raises questions that matter to them, and in so doing encourages them to think carefully.

The teacher's role in this interplay between student, novel, and current events is one of class manager as well as participant in the interaction. As a manager, the teacher will set up and model the activities, then may shift roles and act as a participant in the process of responding and thinking. Through working with the teacher, students should realize that knowledge is not "out there", waiting to be imparted to their passive selves, but is instead an active process of discovery through the novels (Probst, 53-54).

Activity: Marietta Case Study

A very light-skinned black student is attending the Klan rally and is actually approached by a Klan marcher with a recruitment flyer. He is mistakenly viewed as a Caucasian. The Klan member recognizes his mistake after the black student rips up the flyer and throws it at his feet.

Students pair and use the think-aloud method to verbalize what each person is thinking. A third student first records the conversation on tape, then the three students organize it into a written narrative.

Activity 1: A Gathering of Old Men

The purpose of this activity is to explore the differing motivations of Gil and Fix Boutan and enhance the students' ability to predict an outcome. Gil, at the university, will receive a telephone call from his father telling him of Beau's death and asking for his help in avenging it. While, in the author's version, Gil goes home to discuss his brother's death and his own response to it, in this activity students will imagine the conversation between Gil and his father and write it as dialogue. This activity should take place after students read the chapter entitled "Sully."

Activity 2: Gathering of Old Men

The purpose of this activity is to determine student understanding of Luke Will's motivations. Why does he hate black people so? Luke survives and is brought to trial for killing Charlie and wounding Sheriff Mapes. In small groups, students act out the

trial, portraying Luke, the defense attorney and the prosecutor. The student playing Luke will attempt to give Luke's reasons for leading a band of five night riders. The student playing the prosecutor develops the case against Luke and, in the closing argument, demonstrates the wrongness of his actions and motivations.

Activity 1: Jane Pittman

In this activity, students will explore what makes the character of Cluveau suitable for this time and place. First, students will write a description of Cluveau's life and role in the community. Teachers may wish to develop specific questions to guide student responses. Then, students will imagine an encounter between Cluveau and Jane, who have met at their old fishing spot. Jane refuses to speak; students will write Cluveau's monologue as he attempt to explain his actions. Students will write what passes through Jane's mind as she listens to Cluveau, to whom she has sworn never to speak.

Activity 2: Jane Pittman

In this activity, students are asked to identify imaginatively with Jane as she is left responsible for a younger child after the murders of their traveling companions. The teacher will set up the situation by telling the students, "You are there. You are Jane, eleven years old. The patrollers have killed everyone with you except six-year-old Ned. You must now decide whether to go on or turn back. You have only some corn and potatoes with you. How will you get more food? You know that groups of ex-Confederates are patrolling the area, so you stay in the swamps as much as possible. Sometimes, though, you have to use the road. Today is such a day. You hear someone coming."

Students will write a description of the encounter, draw it, or role play it in groups. The role plays should be no more than five minutes in length and should not depict any physical violence.

Relationship of Methodology to Novels

In A Gathering of Old Men, Ernest J. Gaines documents a single day and its aftermath from the viewpoint of each of the characters involved. Though fictional, the work provides a record of one community's response to the threat posed by a hate group. Reading the novel, we were struck by the way it presents the events of a single day from the perspective of various characters. The novel lends itself to a case study treatment because students must use these individual narratives as primary source material for deriving a "factual" reconstruction of the day's events. Students can also use these individual perspectives to determine characters' motivations in preparation for a cause and effect analysis of the novel's action.

From this perspective, we view The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, the fictional chronicle of a black woman's life from the time of the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement, as primary source material for an extended case history of race relations in one Louisiana parish.

Conclusion

Today's adolescents, faced with the task of reading quality literature on themes perhaps foreign to their own experience, need to explore their own reactions to contemporary racial issues, hence the existing and potential case studies of race relations in various communities. We suggest in the references some possible sources for case studies to use as models in the construction of studies from the novels or from community experiences. Activities eliciting affective responses should precede the writing of formal case studies, thereby permitting the expression of emotional and intellectual reactions to an issue of historical and contemporary significance.

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